

Acceptance

FOR MOST OF US, acceptance is a questionable virtue of dubious pedigree. It is a resort we are inclined to exercise by default, when nothing else works—and then reluctantly, dragging our feet. The reputation of acceptance merits renovation. Among other things, it is the critical pivot between Christian virtues and unChristian vices. It can put the seven deadly sins in high relief, but it can also serve as the first step in their eradication. Let us consider what acceptance is, how it functions, and what it can do for us.

While it is true that some things are objectionable, vicious, wrong—in a word, unacceptable—it is equally evident that their occurrence is no less a fact, however much we may deplore them or desire to ignore them. This does not mean that we must compromise our ideals or desist in our effort to work for a better world, but it does mean that we must acknowledge a discrepancy between what outwardly is and what we should like to see. What we are obliged to accept is the state of affairs as presently given, not necessarily its indefinite continuation.

For the Apostle Paul it was hard to kick against the pricks. Paul was, we have this picture of him, driven by a vehemence bordering on outraged fanaticism to eradicate the Christian faith in



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

The Conversion of Saul

Saul, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, ...fell to the earth,” became grounded in a new Reality and thereafter seeks to do the will of Him Whom he sought to deny: “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

Sisyphus-like fashion—by killing Christians, but two would spring up where one once was. The fledgling movement was wholly unacceptable to him. Paul’s very vehement intolerance was part of his problem. It prevented him from seeing clearly. And when, after being blinded by the light of truth, he was enabled to see clearly, what was formerly intolerable became his heart’s desire and his salvation.

Two considerations are at issue here. Acceptability is a function both of **what** we see and **how** we see it. We begin to realize how important the activity of observation is in soul growth—correct

seeing. The act of perceiving is always based on what we think, for our mindset will determine what we see. The adage “seeing is believing” has it backwards: believing is seeing. What we believe will actually direct our eyes to select what confirms it. We see what we want to see; we see to prove our belief system. An angry person sees an angry world. A suspicious person sees people doing what is sinister or threatening. A fearful person sees a world that is hostile, dangerous and alienating.

The physician/metaphysician Deepak Chopra describes an experiment in which a number of flies are put in a glass jar and covered with a lid. After several days the lid is removed and almost all of the flies remain in the jar, though they are no longer confined. They have programmed the limits of their universe. They have made a “premature cognitive commitment” as to what constitutes their reality.

The world changes if and when we change, not vice versa. To change we must first

accept conditions as they are **in fact**. Self-knowledge is the most illusive and difficult form of knowledge because personal desires distort and obscure our vision and rationalization is constantly defending and glossing over our errors and shortcomings. Here again real acceptance implies more than casual assent. It involves a deep and searching commitment to rigorous honesty, however bad we may seem to look. Sentimentalism, favoritism, alibis, vagueness, and temporizing all must be eliminated in our moral scrutiny.

The acceptance of objective reality in a spirit of good-natured open-mindedness creates the climate most favorable for change. While negativity and opposition make one intractable, an agreeable disposition will promote a willingness to entertain alternatives and enable viewing an issue from multiple perspectives.

While we may and must accept others in Christian charity as they are, self-acceptance is a

somewhat more complicated matter. We need to see ourselves with strict impersonality, not to disparage or condemn, but to best discover and disclose what may need alteration or remediation. Even as successful therapy for a mysterious illness is predicated on keen observation and clear diagnosis, so self-analysis is best conducted with comparable objectivity, thoughtfulness, and thoroughness.

We can go only so far in working with what we find unacceptable in ourselves. Whereas we may temper our response to others, we may more easily fluctuate between extremes of indulgent self-justification and merciless self-laceration when regarding our own traits and defects of character.

Of myself I can do nothing. And yet, I must do everything I can because the Father doeth the works through me and if I do not do all I can, much will remain undone.

Real acceptance is Christ-centered and big-hearted. It allows for error. It knows that mistakes, both grievous and trivial, will occur; but it also knows that growth flourishes when the emphasis is on continuity of effort and sincerity of commitment. Being overdemanding of self or overbearing towards

others is counterproductive of soul growth. Of myself I can do nothing. And yet, I must do everything I can because the Father doeth the works through me and if I do not do all I can, much will remain undone.

There is something irreducibly enigmatic about acceptance. If God accepts me through Christ, Who has given His life, both while in the body of Jesus and even now as humanity’s Elder Brother and spiritual Guide, who am I not to accept myself? But surely I am not given carte blanche to do as I elect, willy nilly. Rather does Christ’s continuous Self-giving set a standard by which I can assess my own progress. But the magnitude of His sacrifice and the holy goodness of His Being inclines me to see my own deeds and person as entirely inadequate. While self-satisfaction is a Luciferic snare, self-loathing is no less paralyzing and unChristian, a kind of inverse narcissism.

The Rosicrucian emphasis on service helps one

to steer clear of the twin dangers of hypersubjectivity and the fascination of endless self-analysis. In the course of our other-directed activities, we have ample opportunity to discover where we need to amend our behavior, modify our assumptions, and become more charitable.

However objectionable or vile a person's words and deeds may be, we best serve them and ourselves by identifying what is good in them. We do not equate the doer with the deed, though the temptation sometimes is well-nigh irresistible. On these occasions we may actually be judging another's defect because we have not the humility to acknowledge in ourselves the self-same shortcoming. The beam in our eye is keen to detect, as a diversionary tactic, the mote in the eye of another. Here is where acceptance is synonymous with rigorous honesty.

If I can be clear about my own innumerable failings, I'll be far less intent on moralizing others and playing the righteous hypocrite. Then too, if I have steeped myself in the full understanding of my fallenness and proneness to error—doing what I should not and not doing what I should—if I have learned to tolerate the tension between what I aspire to do and what I see being done, I may also better accept, even nurture, the often undisclosed finer impulses in others and keep the Pharisee in me disempowered.

When is acceptance a sign of common sense, if not wisdom, and when is it but an excuse for cowardice, sloth, or lack of resolve? Clearly a given situation is what it is and can no more be nullified by denial than can light be extinguished by closing

the eyes. The light remains. It is consciousness itself which has darkened. Prerequisite for acceptance are humility and rigorous honesty: honesty to detect and identify; humility to admit and claim as one's own. But the process does not stop here. Acceptance is an action in a series of actions that delineate moral and spiritual growth. It ever calls for emotional and mental calibration and readjustment of one's perceptions, desires and thoughts to an ever-building faith in the intelligent unfolding and fairness of life.

Acceptance presumes a presence of mind, a being-here-now which is founded in trust. Acceptance is instilled with patience. It implies a degree of childlike obedience. And it is conditioned by a right and just understanding of one's relation to God, which is humility.

Acceptance is a cornerstone of sanity and the door to inner conversion. For once we accept something, it is possible then to either eliminate it or embrace and fortify it, depending on what has been identified. The inner assent implied in acceptance has a transformative effect both on what we accept and on

our own person. What we accept, we see differently, from the inside, as it were. As we become more proficient in exercising acceptance, we stop fighting life, we cut loose the defensive mode that estranges life and makes for adversarial relationships and puts us at odds with our own being.

A trait much in evidence in our times is a vain and self-degrading insistence on avoiding any pain incident to self-discipline. We impoverish the spirit and impede our evolution by our unwillingness to experience and endure the physical hardship of



Liberale Da Verona, Miniature, Libreria Piccolomini, Codex 9, fol. Ir., Duomo, Siena

Parable of the Beam and the Mote

“Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” —Matt. 7:3



El Greco (1541-1614), National Gallery, London

Christ on the Mount of Olives (detail)

The proffered chalice is symbolical of the Redeemer's acceptance of the agony of the cross.

pain and discomfort, emotional stress and mental obscurity and ambiguity. Nonacceptance of the given runs counter both to the knowledge that all things work for good for them that love God and to the assurance that with whatever difficulty we encounter in life also is given the wherewithal to deal with it.

From acceptance we may well advance to enthusiastic endorsement, even as Paul invites us to **embrace** tribulation (Rom. 4:15-34), since it works in us great soul power. Admittedly, such an attitude in contemporary times is easily seen as quirky or masochistic. But then the secular world was ever at odds with the mind that knows that flesh and blood does not inherit the Kingdom of God.

In this, as in all other matters, our life's ideal and inspiration is the life and Person of Christ Jesus, whose act of choosing the cross stands before us as the paragon and daunting extremity of acceptance. This is what only love can do. The fruit of love born on that stark tree was first flowered from the seed of acceptance. The heart of Christian acceptance is set before us in vivid pictures, iconic in their significance and lucidity: Christ kneeling in

Gethsemane and, though as if sweating blood as he struggles to accept his chosen destiny, uttering the words, "not my will but thine be done"; and Christ on the cross, arms nailed, yes, but also arms stretched out to embrace and envelop the humanity He came to redeem, a gesture that transforms the open-armed acceptance of death itself into the demonstration of the transcendence of divine will over all obstacles and limitations, be they material or spiritual.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner writes that "if the heart is really kept open and ready for God, anything that may happen to us in life can be accepted as a grace and a blessing. Of course this means having a heart that is well-disposed and humble, that listen and obeys. But why not ask God for that gift?"

Paul reminds us to put our personal tribulations into perspective: "What thou sufferest is but little in comparison to them who have suffered so much, who have been so strongly tempted, so grievously afflicted, so many ways tried and exercised (Heb. 11:33, 37). However, such advice is likely to fall on deaf ears. For it is **our** suffering and **our** inconvenience that is at issue and we want it to end **now!** Such is the attitude of the impatient and self-serving soul not used to practicing acceptance nor familiar with the blessings it bestows.

Large-hearted acceptance can draw hardship, pain, misunderstanding, and grief to its bosom and turn it, in time, into a treasure of the soul, something sublime, a glory that will make the angels sing. Thomas à Kempis tells us that "the truly patient man minds not by whom it is he is exercised...But how much soever and how often soever any adversity happens to him from anything created, he takes it all with equality of mind, as from the hand of God with thanksgiving and esteems it a great gain."

What, then, is the role of acceptance for those who spurn the path of the pastoral Abel, who historically, as Sons of the Widow, are ever attempting to improve on, if not reject, the given, be it a law, a custom, or an idea? Obviously, for these Sons of Cain, for whom pride of intellect and impatience of restraint are notable stumbling blocks, acceptance poses a major challenge and is

an aptitude earnestly to be cultivated.

Acceptance does not slow our progress, curtail our precious sense of freedom, nor damp down our true individuality. Rather it enhances and promotes them by better enabling us to conform our wills with His Whose Will for our good is boundless.

Acceptance is a modus operandi, a strategy for reasonable living that allows us to get on with life

I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes. My serenity is directly proportional to my level of acceptance.

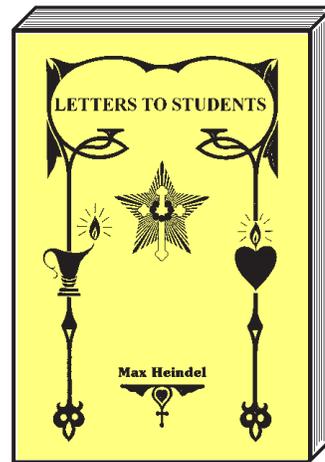
in an engaged way. Though our sanity dictates we acknowledge that something **is**, we need not **like** it or give up our hopes and efforts to realize what is better or more right and true. Firstly, though, we must accept it as it is. Gleaning wisdom where we may, we could benefit from advice offered through a 12-step source: "Acceptance is the answer to **all** my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be **at this moment**. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake...I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on **what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes**...My serenity is directly proportional to my level of acceptance" (*emphasis added*).

We are fortunate to know what will make us better persons. We are blessed when we practice what we know in all our affairs. So does the Word become flesh. And so is flesh transfigured by the light of Truth—if we will accept it. □

—C.W.

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